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Frontiers for the performing arts

National Endowment for the Arts Performing Arts Director Douglas Sonntag offered his “state-of-the-state” national perspective on performing arts at January’s Montana Performing Arts Consortium (MPAC) annual conference.

“What are today’s frontiers for the performing artists, and how do you know if you’re about to cross the border and enter uncharted territory?”

“The frontiers that the performing arts organizations must explore today are formidable as our societies are changing in such rapid and unpredictable ways. How, then, can theater, dance, opera, symphonic music remain as critical and core tenets of civic life? Indeed, how do the live performing arts, that require audiences to gather in a common space for a specific amount of time, remain relevant in a world that is increasingly nonlinear and individualized? Are the performing arts a communal meal or a dinner for one?”

“Here are challenges that I think are the most important: the changing demographics of American society; racial diversity and cultural equity; the opportunities, challenges, and possibilities of technology; and, the changing expectations and desires of audiences of today and tomorrow ...”

Read the complete transcript of his address on MAC’s website: art.mt.gov.

THE LITERARY LANDSCAPE

These Living Songs: Reading Montana Poetry

Edited by Lisa Simon and Brady Harrison
Published 2014 by The University of Montana Press, Missoula, MT
\$26.99 hardcover

The University of Montana Press introduces the first anthology of essays exclusively on the poetry of Montana: *These Living Songs: Reading Montana Poetry*. With this book, editors Lisa Simon and Brady Harrison fashioned a reading experience that would appeal to a wide audience of students, scholars, and curious readers from any field.

The book offers engaging essays on a broad range of Montana poets – from old friends like Richard Hugo and James Welch, to fresh looks at established figures such as Sandra Alcosser, Vic Charlo, Roger Dunsmore, Tami Haaland, Lowell Jaeger, Melissa Kwasny, Greg Pape and Henry Real Bird, to voices new to the scene. The collection explores poems by working class, cowboy, and Native American poets and sounds the effort to fashion new voices and found new – and sometimes decidedly not-male – poetic traditions. It also provides refreshing new avenues into such challenging poets as Grace Stone Coates, J.V. Cunningham, Madeline DeFrees, and Patricia Goedicke.

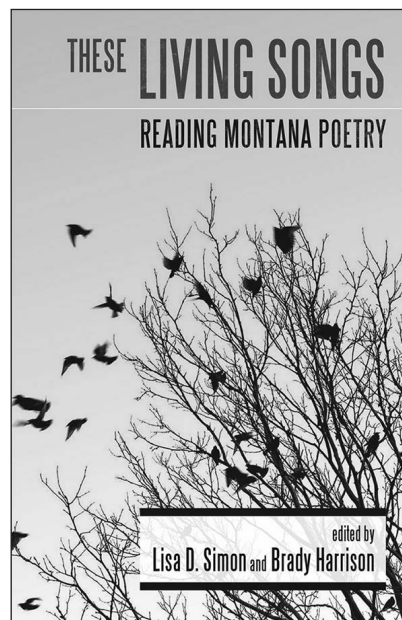
Writer Annick Smith says of the collection: “Montana is a huge state with few people, big skies, and a glorious literary tradition. In *These Living Songs, Reading Montana Poetry*, some of our best scholars, writers, and editors examine the works and legacies of some of our best poets. Their

insights will open worlds of the imagination to a new generation of readers and will refresh and inform the memories of old-timers like me, who were lucky to know Richard Hugo, James Welch, Madeleine DeFrees, and Patricia Goedicke in their prime.”

The editorial intent was not only to enlarge and enliven the study of Montana poetry, but to demonstrate how to read poetry well – closely and insightfully. To achieve this, the editors asked the contributors to select just a few extraordinary poems from a Montana poet they love and to unfold the value closely, as if to curious readers.

“The goal,” says Simon, “was not to give a scholarly account of each poet, but to invite readers into the deeper pleasures of knowing a few poems well.”

For readers relatively new to poetry, and for those who may have had bad experiences with poetry in the past, the essays have been designed from the start to be reader friendly. The contributors rely on plain, accessible writing, and even as the essays offer the depth and multi-dimensional cultural considerations expected of literary scholars, they remain relatively free of critical terminology and the language of high theory.



The result is not only the first of its kind in Montana, it’s a different sort of “critical collection of essays” altogether. It’s one that truly helps Montanans absorb their own literary heritage from passionate and knowledgeable readers.

The poet Roger Dunsmore said of the collection, “Simon and Harrison’s sense of poetry as ‘living,’ and their clear commitment to ‘advocacy’

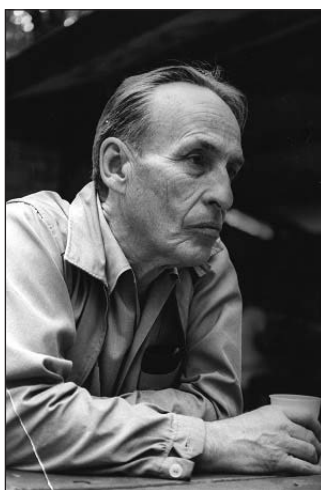
rather than merely academic criticism is to be commended. This poetry’s deepest debt is to the dynamics of Montana as a place, with all the conundrums and contradictions that entails, but also there is a necessary debt to these scholars and teachers who open the poems to those who may not find them accessible.”

This commitment to advocacy is nowhere more clear than in the final chapter by Simon in which she presents direct guidelines for the promotion of reading poetry and for renewing the pleasures of deep reading in Montana communities.

Inaugural festival celebrates legacy of Norman Maclean

There is a magic to Montana, and that sense of magic was captured exquisitely on the written page by native son Norman Maclean. Best known for his novella *A River Runs Through It*, Maclean is also lauded for his short stories and *Young Men and Fire*, his hard-headed investigation into the tragic Mann Gulch fire of 1949.

To honor and celebrate the heritage of Maclean, Alpine Artisans, a 23-year old Seeley Lake arts organization, is hosting the inaugural “In the Footsteps of Norman Maclean Festival” July 10-13. The festival will highlight those who remember Maclean’s life in Seeley Lake, those who worked with him on his book, *Young Men and Fire*, and



Author Norman Maclean

writers and scholars who have reviewed, analyzed and appreciate Maclean’s works.

Guests include a forest ranger who walked Mann Gulch with Maclean during the author’s investigation of the fire, professors who taught with him at the University of Chicago, his son, author and reporter John Maclean, and others. Keynote speaker and National Book Award winner Pete Dexter will recall the days he spent in Seeley Lake with

Maclean in the early 1980s and the influence Maclean had on his writing.

Festival events will be held on the river and in Seeley Lake at the Double Arrow Resort and nearby Camp Paxson.

Saturday’s events center on Maclean’s writings and Robert Redford’s film, “A River Runs Through It.” Camp Paxson, which was the site of the nation’s first smokejumper training center, will host Sunday’s presentations on both Norman and John N. Maclean’s numerous published works on wildland fires and their impact, as well as the heritage of smoke-jumping in Montana.

Monday brings a Writer’s Workshop and a full-day tour of Mann Gulch, the scene of the wildfire documented in *Young Men and Fire*. Tours of the actual fishing holes described in *A River Runs Through It* and updates on the successful conservation efforts on the Blackfoot River are also part of the event.

For complete details, visit www.macleant-footsteps.com.

MONTANA POET LAUREATE

Graveside

By Tami Haaland

We sit on the edge, legs dangling,
and she’s wise-cracking her way toward
something final. What are you doing?
she asks. I’m putting lotion on your face.
Her eyes close. It’s too late, she says.

The earth smells musky and rich.
We both like it, have spent hours
cultivating and planting, taking
its harvest in strawberries and zucchini.
This time, the trench is deep, and

we know what the seed is. You don’t know,
she says, what it’s like. I nudge her,
suggest we get up, take a walk.
Her long hair shines silver, a late glimmer.
Let’s drive, she says. The path to the car

is today’s eternity. There’s garbage
on the floor, I say. Help me get this leg in,
she says. It’s not garbage yet.
We pass over a plateau, a hundred miles
of visibility, mountains in the distance.

But she’s foggy with low clouds, bent fingers
warming to sun through glass. For now,
we have luck and speed. A tail wind.
I vote we keep going, head west,
wash her feet one last time in the tide.

She says no. She doesn’t want to miss dinner.
What if they forget to feed her?
And she misses the late night comfort
of kicking her heels, one and then the other,
against the damp and looming earth.

